# Locative Food: The Future of Food is a Peach

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Abstract: Locative food releases food from the hegemony of the restaurant, its rituals, codes, performative narratives, complexities, paraphernalia, processes, and entry fees; taking food out into a wider world, to locations that function along with the food to create provocations of the senses and a way of making us discern gastronomic possibilities afresh. This paper looks at Heston Blumenthal's *Sound of the Sea* as the epitome of restaurant complexity; Roland Barthes' experiences and responses to food in Japan in the late 1960s; Kenya Hara's concepts of design and the design ethos underpinning MUJI; a brief overview of the picnic; and my own developing simple conceptions of locative food. The outcomes of my ongoing research in locative food are both theoretical and realised artefacts, with one potential outcome being that the future of food could be a peach (albeit a very special peach).

## Aural impregnation: Heston Blumenthal's Sound of the Sea

> If you just nudge people, that's it, you don't turn them into lab rats, that's not the point of this, it's just a little nudge, so you just lose yourself in a memory that's triggered by food (Blumenthal, 2015, min 1:27 to 1:46).

Heston Blumenthal discusses his use of sound effects to nudge eaters into experiencing the evocation of nostalgic childhood memories of summer holidays by the sea in his acclaimed dish, *Sound of the Sea*. The recipe involves over seventy ingredients and processes (Blumenthal, 2009, pp.206–215), most of which are not evident in the final dish that presents an eater with what has essentially been reduced to seaweed, an oyster, parts of a razor clam and a sea urchin, edible sand, and some foam, served on a sheet of glass over a box of beach sand – to be consumed in his *Fat Duck* restaurant while listening to 'waves lapping up against the shore' on iPod ear-buds (Blumenthal, 2009, p.209). However, further consideration of the text of this interview evinces duplicity in that it is not the food itself that would cause one to lose oneself in a memory of childhood summer holidays by the sea (and there are surely few who have childhood memories of eating oysters, razor clams, sea urchins, foam and seaweed on a beach, indeed, these ingredients in themselves are mute – they need context – and cannot elicit such memories), more likely the eater, already submissive to the myriad codes and instructional signifiers in the restaurant, will easily be induced to respond as directed (to think back to childhood holidays by the sea, their own, or those they have heard about, or the mythical), as much as by the sound of waves lapping against the shore. Then to sink into a nostalgia, imagined or thought to be heartfelt, that is essential to the scripted meaning of the dish and without which the dish is merely a smug baroque *tour de force*; and more fundamentally, the eater had already become a so-called *lab rat* simply by crossing the threshold (physically and literally) to the performative narratives of the restaurant wherein questioning is proscribed. Blumenthal's aural sleight of hand, little more than technical trickery, is employed to endow food with a temporal and locative otherness in the domain of the scripted theatrical; and such are the performative narratives (subliminal instructions, implicit requirements, learned/observed rituals) of the restaurant that eaters will go along with the prompted scene, hopefully without wandering too far off script into darker thoughts of the very loss of childhood, or the loss of parents, school friends, siblings even, that could also be triggered by the intended memory of fabled summer holidays. And considering the power of sound to *nudge*, for many British born between 1945 and 1975 the first few bars of *Berceuse* from Gabriel Fauré's *Dolly Suite* will just in themselves bring back floods of potent memories associated with the BBC's *Listen with Mother* radio programmes in a manner so specific, impossible simply with the sound of lapping waves and an attendant script, and which, as with eaters before service in *The Fat Duck*, shares the imperative: 'Are you sitting comfortably? Then I'll begin [to tell you a story] (Oxenford, 2013, min 0:17 to 0:22).' Sit down, shut up, don't fidget, do as you are told, and listen carefully to me...

From the sluiceable surfaces of the Golden Arches to the crisply whispered napery of so-called 'fine dining', from concrete and glass, by myriad forms, to ancient timbers, wear-glazed floors, and the aura of years of use, today's restaurants are alimentally sterile, ring-fenced havens, sanitised of reality, cleansed of all but approved elements (but with *amuses yeux* so carefully selected); and in those establishments harbouring a high opinion of the status of the experience that they provide - *les acclamés* - there is an insouciant subscription to the catechism of ordinances and rituals outlined in Charles Spence's *The Perfect Meal* (Spence, 2009); a manual for creating and organising the space in which food is consumed, its ambience, how food is consumed, but not the actual food itself. These restaurants confound the customer with a superficial gloss that barely hides their lack of sense of place. They may be objects of gastronomic or hedonistic pilgrimage, of supreme reputation, outstanding service, critical and media acclaim, nominally with a celebrity chef (who may or may not be in

attendance), and in Blumenthal's case, embody self-appointed 'perfection' (Blumenthal, 2009, pp.7–10); however, a restaurant is an *a priori* non-place – it is a space of transience, anonymity, received culture, realising an overwhelming myth purporting that in itself it is of social merit, of historical or aesthetic value (Augé, 1995, pp.75–115), that it is an actual place. Whereas McDonalds' 'restaurants' have a wholly symbiotic relationship for their uniform shrink-wrap surroundings, and are intended to be non-places by the definition of fast food, gastronomic activity in highly opinionated restaurants bares no relationship with the space's containing structure, their menus do not reflect a chateau, a medieval timbered hall, a farmhouse, a country house, a former mill, former pub, nor the faux ('designer') interiors of new or re-builds. The interior space of these restaurants is merely a set of layers of the greater, contrived palimpsest of the 'dining experience'.

These *acclamé* restaurant constructs rely on customers abandoning normal critical faculties and unwittingly signing up to an invisible contract assuming near total gullibility to performative narratives. Standing back and unpacking these narratives evinces a ritualised sensorial experience wholly based on elements incidental to the food itself, while simultaneously prejudicing notions of alternative experiences of that same food.

> [...] the event that originally made me want to be a chef when I was just 16 years old: a meal on the terrace of a three-star Michelin restaurant in Provence where the smell of lavender bushes, the sound of cicadas and the visual splendour of the setting almost seemed to eclipse the food and sent me down the rabbit hole (Blumenthal, 2014, p.xiii).

It is ironic that this protagonist of *The Perfect Meal* - the perfect *auteur-chef* - should describe this formative experience wherein he began to understand the huge potential of locative otherness, but, paraphrasing his own words, he chose instead to descend into the dark placelessness of a rabbit hole rather than surveying the world from the sunny top of the warren - the scent of lavender, cicadas and visual splendours of an idyllic Provence are all external to and other than *L'Oustau de Baumanière*. And, *inter alia*, Blumenthal's particular rabbit hole later led to his audio-gastronomic *Sound of the Sea*, rather than considering presenting similar core ingredients on a real beach with real waves – here place, the childhood summer holiday seaside as experienced or suggested, is insinuated into the non-place of the restaurant. And this dish begins to suggest a deeply manipulative mocking attitude to his customers – those patronisingly nudged others - yet such innovations/gimmicks have been central to Blumenthal's and other celebrities' continuing critical and client success. However, there is nothing idyllic about the locale of Blumenthal's restaurant, *The Fat Duck* - all sensory titillation is contained within its whitewashed walls.

**The empty sign – Roland Barthes and Japanese food**

> [Tempura est] d'une sorte de méditation, autant spectaculaire qu'alimentaire (puisque la *tempura* se prépare sous vos yeux), autour de ce quelque chose que nous déterminons, faute de mieux (et peut-être en raison de nos ornières thématiques), du côté du léger, de l'aérien, de l'instantané, du fragile, du transparent, du frais, du rien, mais dont le vrais nom serait l'interstice sans bords pleins, ou encore: le signe vide. (1) (Barthes, 1970, pp.35–36)

Roland Barthes, French literary theorist, philosopher, critic, and semiotician, first travelled to Japan in May 1966, and again in March/April 1967, and December 1967/January 1968 (Samoyault, 2017, pp.296–298). His 1970 book, *L'empire des signes* was based on these three visits.

A reputation had been established in France for Roland Barthes after the success of *Mythologies,* first published in 1957 (in 1972 in English), in which he rails against bourgeois attitudes in a selection of short essays on contemporary cultural phenomena (including food and wine), identifying them as modern myths on account of their received meaning in bourgeois milieux. In 'Steak-frites', he politely ridicules the idea that 'steak is at the heart of a cut of meat, mythologically it is meat in the pure state, and whoever eats it assimilates a taurine strength' (Barthes, 2013, pp.83–85). That

> full-bloodedness is steak's *raison d'être*: the degrees to which it is cooked are expressed not in calorie units but in images of blood, rare steak is *saignant* when it is said to suggest the arterial blood of the animal whose throat has been cut, or *bleu*, which is the plethoric blood of veins suggested by the purplish colour, a superior degree of redness (Barthes, 2013, pp.83–85).

Meaning was rife in French food, but nine years later he encounters a culture in Japan that

> offers the example of a civilisation where the articulation of signs [in the domain of semiotics] is extremely delicate, sophisticated, where nothing is left to the nonsign [non-sense, lacking meaning]; but this semantic level, expressed in the extraordinary finesse with which the signifier is treated, in a way means nothing, says nothing: it doesn't refer to any signified, especially not to any ultimate signified, and thus for me it the utopia of a world both strictly semantic and strictly aesthetic" (Barthes, 1985, pp.83–87).

And in this empire of signs he finds his experience of Japanese food as being devoid of meaning, untrammelled – food that is just food, and of which *tempura* is a prime example.

Barthes delights in the way that *tempura*, originally Lenten fasting food of Portuguese missionaries (still extant

in Portugal today is *peixinhos da horta* – little fishes from the garden – green beans deep-fired in light batter), was refined by 'the Japanese techniques of cancellation and exemption, [to become] a kind of meditation, as much spectacular as alimentary (since tempura is prepared before your eyes)' (Barthes, 1982, pp.24–26). A diaphanous prawn or green bean becomes 'un morceau fini, séparé, nommé et cependant tout ajouré; mais le cerne est si léger qu'il en devient abstrait: l'aliment n'a plus pour enveloppe que le temps [...] qui l'a solidifié' (Barthes, 1970, pp.35–36). Barthes' *tout ajouré* has been translated at 'entirely perforated' which makes no sense in this context nor in our understanding of *tempura*; he has used *dentelle* – lacework - earlier in the same essay, and it makes sense here similarly to translate *ajouré* as openwork, reflecting not a perforated nor permeable coating, but one which 'est si fragile qu'il recouvre imparfaitement le fragment de nourriture, laisse apparaître un rose de crevette, ou vert de piment' (Barthes, 1970, pp.35–36). The *tempura* coating is so light that it has become abstract, and which only time has rendered it materially stable – the antithesis of mid-20th century mainstream French restaurant and domestic food. And here also is a personal interactive relationship with the cook and the ingredients as they combine before the eater's eyes, in sharp contrast to the still-prevalent hidden preparation and cooking undertaken by other people in another space (in France) – 'meals elaborated in advance behind the partition of the kitchen, [a] secret room where *everything is permitted* [author's italics], provided the product emerges from it all the more composed, embellished, embalmed, shellacked' (Barthes, 1982, pp.11–14) – at table preparation (say, *crêpes Suzette*, or *canard à la presse*) was considered rather theatrical. The personal interaction and his delight continues,

> [...] an item we ourselves select [...] the light, the aerial, of the instantaneous, the fragile, the transparent, the crisp, the trifling [*rien* – Barthes is possibly hinting at something between trifling and nothing here] but whose real name would be the interstice without specific edges: the empty sign (Barthes, 1982, pp.24–26).

Barthes' interstice is an interpretation of *Ma* (間) – roughly: gap, interval, space. Barthes' interstice is a

> positive rendering of conducts generally viewed (in Barthes's socio-linguistic sphere) as negative and weak: solitude, neutrality, ephemerality. Barthes [highlights] the apparent empty spaces skirted by the linear, goal-obsessed Western logomachy. These spaces are not valorised or obvious, but subtly present (O'Meara, 2012, pp.134–139).

*Ma* can ultimately be interpreted as bringing us to 'the edge of all processes of locating things by naming and distinguishing' (O'Meara, 2012, p.135). As such, and in Barthes' experience in context, *tempura* just is (what it is), a signifier without a signified – an empty sign. And as a system,

> Japanese food establishes itself within a reduced system of substance (from the clear to the divisible), in a shimmer of the signifier: these are the elementary characters of the writing, established upon a kind of vacillation of language, and indeed it is what Japanese food appears to be: a written food, tributary to the gestures of division and selection which inscribe the foodstuff, not a meal tray [here Barthes is referencing colour magazine photography of food, typified by *Elle*], but in a profound space which hierarchises man, table, and universe (Barthes, 1982, pp.11–14).

### The picnic – the joys of eating out in the open

Between the 18th and the early 20th century, picnics were largely the preserve of the wealthier classes, often associated with hunting, gaming, or horse-riding, and formally serviced by their domestic staff; in comparison to agricultural workers briefly halting their labours for 'lunch' *in situ* in nearby fields; or taking all their sustenance in the fields during the long days of harvest time.

*Le pique-nique* had become an established part of French bourgeois life for it to be integral to Édouard Manet's $^{1862}/_{63}$ painting, *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe/Le bain*; and the picnic featured in 19th-century British genre painting in images of and for the leisured classes. In the 21st century the more egalitarian picnic is a soft form of locative eating whose food is usually chosen for convenience and portability, whose location is chosen for leisurely comfort and enjoyment (typified by the beach barbecue), and whose timing is usually in daytime and evening hours in warmer months. And the improbably rich and voluminous picnics of *The Famous Five* are fixed in the popular culture of Britain from their first appearance in 1942.

Overall, locative food is conceptually absent from the conventional picnic, though this is not to diminish the social importance of the picnic – locative food is simply conceptually distinct from the picnic in intent and content.

### Things that just are what they are

'Its simplicity should be gorgeous without a feeling of inferiority (Hara, 2018, p.35)' Kenya Hara is here describing the MUJI design ethos, comparing its simple empty sheet of paper approach to design with the complexities and the burgeoning sales of the (very expensive) gorgeous in booming early 1980s Japan. He later describes design as,

> the energetic acknowledgement of our own living world through the making of things and through communication. Outstanding perceptions and discoveries should make us happy and proud as living human beings. New things are not born of nothingness, and they are not taken from without,

> but from our attempts to boldly awaken our everyday existences, which seem ordinary and mundane. Design is the provocation of the senses and a way of making us discern the world afresh (Hara, 2007, pp.410–411).

Hara is keen to identify a difference between what we in the West see as simplicity in Japanese design, design which he sees as actually based on 'sustained cultural homogeneity for over one thousand years, and the present era is a natural continuation of this' (Hara, 2014, pp.11–17), and what we see as simplicity in Western design.

> At a glance Japanese design looks simple, but its simplicity differs from that discovered by Western modernism, which was based on rationality. I call the simplicity of Japanese design 'emptiness'. Instead of disseminating a precise, articulate message, extreme plainness – emptiness – can invite a variety of interpretations, just like an empty vessel. [...] When looking at Japanese culture armed with the knowledge of this concept, a number of things become apparent that perhaps we hadn't noticed before (Hara, 2014, pp.11–17).

This emptiness – potential – is the product of an articulated design process, it is not 'born of nothingness'. Hara believes that

> mental activities like 'pondering' and 'ideating' do not emerge from a conscious process of 'thinking' that begins at ground zero; rather, I believe that they stem from our unconscious impulse to 'inquire'. To 'inquire' is predicated on 'I think' – it establishes that emptiness that sets our brains to work (Hara, 2018, p.35).

However, much current contemporary, modernist, and re-imagined traditional food served in Western (*acclamé*) restaurants is steeped in complexity as if it needs to distance itself from (cheap) fast foods – chain burgers, chain pizza, even fish and chips, which is just that – moreover, to imply significant added value to account for its high price. Blumenthal's seventy element *Sound of the Sea* is just one dish in a larger tasting menu, and such complexity requires large numbers of kitchen staff – over half of *The Fat Duck*'s eighty four staff work in the kitchens - and this, in turn, is cited as mitigation for the price (though challenged by staff claims of exploitation, see Schneiders and Millar, 2020). A vicious cycle of cause and effect in which complexity is ironically an indicator of prestige and refinement. And such is this accepted as the normal that it is inconceivable for an *acclamé* restaurant to serve more than the occasional and atypical dish on *à la carte* or a larger tasting menu that evinces the simplicity described by Roland Barthes and Kenya Hara.

## Locative food

So, what could happen if one breaks the rules, fidgets, and peels away *Sound of the Sea* from the state of mind that is *The Fat Duck* and its ilk. And what will happen if the entire developmental process of *Sound of the Sea* is rethought with only its significant elements being offered in a real environment that was merely an audio-gastronomic allusion in a restaurant? Here one can be free of the pressure of having to impress with unnecessary complexities, processes, paraphernalia, indeed, the hegemony of the restaurant; moreover, here one can work with the location, time, season, and weather – locative food. This will not blindly copy Japanese design ethics, nor Barthes wide-eyed vision of the interstice, but reading both, it can begin to identify developing kernel elements and letting ideas bubble up in an empty sheet of paper approach, championing food as food that just is, and this will contradict every aspect of the *in-restaurant* experience and its ultimate *Perfect Meal* without engaging imperfection. Nevertheless, here are rewarding thought experiments that can also be realised.

I am working with two approaches to locative food artefacts, both of which I designate as conceptions exploring the dynamic of food, location, and (event) time: one, a broadsheet incorporating imagery with accompanying narratives, the other, incidentally in stark contrast, an assemblage of few words. Whether broadsheet or assemblage, many words or few, both combine food with location and (event) time, and both can engender simplicity in their different ways. To paraphrase Gertrude Stein, (2) I am interested in 'where where is integral, and where there is there.'

The title-less 'assemblage of few words' may be seen as a menu, a list of ingredients, instructions (but not in the sense of commands), a script, a story, free verse, an image, an incantation – all of these and none of these, such classification is inimical, not part of the assemblage ontology, as is any descriptor of its form. Conceptually, like the food experience it embodies, it is just what it is. To explain, to provide a/the meaning for the assemblage is to destroy its brevity, to pin down a specificity, and to proscribe an organic ontology. The assemblage could be spoken (though the spoken word is inherently nuanced by the speaker), hand-written, printed, or realised in a medium local and relevant. A few words can conjure up an event that itself could be so engaging that its later description generates vast numbers of words. An extreme, but not unique example of seemingly disproportionate description of such emotional time was referenced by filmmaker and theoretician, Hollis Frampton, in a seminal 1972 essay in which he recalls listening to an audio tape of Craig Breedlove describing the crash at the end of his 600 mph land speed record attempt – the crash event lasted 8.7 seconds, Breedlove's coherent account of the crash lasted 95 minutes (Frampton 1983, pp.87–106). However, these assemblages are not intended to generate loquacity.

Here is an 18-word title-less assemblage that includes time, location, alimentary, and contextual elements:

winter full-moon
sibilant chanting waves
a brazier
hand-warm native oysters
frozen vodka
a sapphire silk shawl

And another 17-word title-less assemblage that includes time, location, alimentary elements:

by the greenhouse:
late afternoon, high summer
warm ripe tomatoes
fresh garlic
fleur de sel
good oil

I intend that these word assemblages should reflect Kenya Hara's 'design is the provocation of the senses and a way of making us discern the world afresh' (Hara, 2007, pp,410–411), but also reflect Barthes experience of how Japanese food works, just as it is (Bregazzi 2020).

The broadcast works on paper come from a project that sought to develop extended menu items that could come together in a book to produce conceptual meals devoid of actual food, yet embodying deep conceptions of food assemblages. Created on double-sided A3+ sheets, they are difficult to describe in this restricted paper format. These artefacts are titled employing a conventional menu item descriptor, for example, *honeyed partridge, stem ginger, umeboshi*, which, in turn is broadened, 'breast of red-legged partridge marinated overnight in manuka honey, crisp-fried, skin-down in clarified butter, with thinly-sliced umeboshi and stem ginger, and once-frozen cucumber noodles' (Bregazzi 2020).

The honeyed-partridge sheet has an extended narrative, a sort of back-story:

> Les Groies, Ars-en-Ré, Île de Ré, France
> 08.15, 10th September 2016
>
> I was on my morning walk to the boulangerie for my usual order of 'une ficelle *tradition,* et deux croissants, svp...' when 7 red-legged partridges drew unnecessary attention to themselves in noisy scuttling across this stubble field [pictured], 'kuk-kuk, kuk-kuk.' I probably wouldn't have seen them had they just stayed quietly where they were. This brief encounter somehow prompted the thought of 'fig-peckers in honey,' an alleged favourite in imperial Rome. My mind happily surprises me with these seemingly left-field leaps, though in retrospect, a friend was writing the first chapter of a food biography of Rome. [...]

This would be realised:

> This conception would be presented on an extra-thin, perfectly matte-white porcelain plate, with a centred circular trompe l'oeil, full-colour dressing of herbs and salad leaves, all raised in very slight relief above the surface of the plate. The ingredients will be centrally arranged, leaving a border of green ceramic herbs and salad about 2 to 3cms wide.

And a location:

> Ideally, just after sunset; on a very warm, not quite still high summer's evening; in a small clearing in ancient deciduous woodland; just the odd zephyr to stir the leaves. There are no wolves, ticks, sorcerers, twitchy ungulates, nor other unwelcomes in the glade; no fairies, spirits, shape-shifters, nor other enchantments, probably; and it's far too late in the year for these spring flowers:
>
> > I know a bank where the wild thyme blows,
> > Where oxslips and the nodding violet grows,
> > Quite over-canopied with luscious woodbine,
> > With sweet musk roses and with eglantine:
> > There sleeps Titania sometime of the night,
> > Lull'd in these flowers with dances and delight;
> > [...] (*A Midsummer Night's Dream*, act 2, sc.1)

And there is further explanatory text (Bregazzi 2020).

My locative food research and artefact development is still very much work in progress, more of which is being posted online (Bregazzi, 2020).

## The future of food is a peach

Taking the triad, *location, time, food,* to another, maybe shocking but obvious level involves the aforementioned peach. Very few of us have access to fruit trees/bushes, and even *pick-your-own* is not always accessible and is generally seen as a means of bulk collection (and the odd 'tasting'). But consider the opportunity to travel to a location specifically to eat a perfectly ripe peach, straight from the tree. This would not be PYO; it involves the orchardist selecting a perfectly ripe fruit at its optimum time, and presenting that fruit to the eater: nothing more, nothing less than the peach. Add the travel elements and this could easily become a pilgrimage. The way of the peach... (Bregazzi 2020)

And for peach, read any fruit that has an optimum ripeness. Gastronomy cannot be less complex.

## Notes

1. [Tempura] is a kind of meditation, as much spectacular as alimentary (since *tempura* is prepared before your eyes), around an item we ourselves select, lacking anything better (an perhaps by reason of our thematic ruts), on the side of the light, the aerial, of the instantaneous, the fragile, the transparent, the crisp,

the trifling, but whose real name would be the interstice without specific edges, or again: the empty sign. (Barthes, 1982, pp.24–26)

2. 'There is no there there' (Stein, 1937, p.37)

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